

The Uncanny Crossover

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Category: Half-Life

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2005-06-09 07:54:40

Updated: 2006-09-15 08:45:34

Packaged: 2016-04-26 21:59:24

Rating: T

Chapters: 9

Words: 14,636

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: HalfLife2 XMen Crossover. Beast, Wolverine and Colossus are accidentally teleported to City 17 in a parallel universe, where they must fight tooth and nail to make it back home alive.

1. The Experiment

Half-Life 2/X-Men Crossover

By Dennis Goldsmith

"A fine day to be inside, making great strides in the name of Science. Wouldn't you agree, gentlemen?" Dr. Henry McCoy, known to his fellow X-Men as "Beast", smiled and raised an eyebrow as he looked up from the panel of a very large machine he was working on.

Logan and Piotr, or "Wolverine" and "Colossus" as they were called by their comrades, smiled nervously and swallowed hard as they nodded their hesitant agreement. Indeed it was an appropriate day to be inside, since the weather outdoors was a raging torrent of rain, thunder and lightning. However, their task at hand was not something either of them looked forward to.

Over a year ago, Beast had begun constructing a kind of teleportation device, the plans for which he had been drawing and revising for the past decade or so, whenever he found the time. It was only within the past few months, however, that he was able to actually send objects from one point to another.

Beast started off his experiments by sending inanimate objects like furniture and clothing to another teleporter built by a mutant named "Forge", located on Muir Island. After experiencing success with these, he moved on to more complex objects, such as various electronic devices, samples of bacteria and other microorganisms, and eventually progressed to successfully teleporting house plants and lab mice without any complications. Today would be a milestone,

however, because today he would send humans - or at least mutant-humans - through his teleporter and finally be able to record what was experienced during the teleportation process.

Wolverine and Colossus, as well as Beast himself, were making the final preparations for the journey as several of their fellow X-Men looked on with nervous anticipation. Scott Summers, known as "Cyclops", looked particularly worried for the safety of his friends as he paced back and forth, occasionally throwing questions at Beast to reassure himself that the three of them would be alright.

"I've reminded you several times, Scott, that this procedure is completely safe, as we have concluded from our previous experiments with living organisms. There have been no complications or side effects so far, and so this experiment today is really only a formality that should be done before we put the teleporter to regular use. I assure you that we will all be fine. We'll be to Muir and back before you know it."

Wolverine and Colossus seemed to settle ever so slightly after hearing Beast's reassuring words again, but Cyclops continued to fret, saying, "What about all the lightning and thunder going on outside? Could that have any effect on the process? Maybe we should postpone until it clears up, or at least wait until Ororo gets here so that we can control the situation better."

"Nonsense, Scott," Beast replied, "This lab is far enough underground that lightning will be of no consequence - besides, all of our power is self-generated and self-contained and functions completely independently of the power source on the surface. There's nothing to worry about."

Cyclops clenched his jaw and finally sat down, as his wife, Jean Grey, massaged his shoulders and grinned sympathetically at the three X-Men who would take the trip through the teleporter. Beast waved away her concern and motioned for Wolverine and Colossus to approach the teleportation bay. With their chins held high they did as they were asked, but Colossus leaned over to whisper to Wolverine in his thick Russian accent, "I have met many dangers and battled many villains without fear or hesitation - Da, I have not once cowered from a task that has been handed to me. Now, however, I am finding myself afraid for some reason I cannot explain. Do you not feel afraid as well, friend Logan?"

"I can feel all the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end," Wolverine replied, "but I'm pretty sure that's just the static build-up. See?"

Wolverine reached out with his finger and shocked Colossus, who in his flesh-and-blood form, flinched slightly at the electrical contact and muttered something to Wolverine in Russian.

"Hmm..." Beast paused for a moment and wiggled his fury blue fingers in the air.

"There does seem to be a bit more of a charge in the air than usual -"

"See?" Cyclops rose to his feet, "I told you. We should wait 'til -"

"However," Beast interrupted, "It will have little if any impact on the whole process."

Beast smiled triumphantly at Cyclops, who sat back down with a defeated look on his face.

"Gentlemen, if you would be so kind as to take your positions, I will initiate the first phase."

Colossus and Wolverine looked at Beast, then at each other, and then took the final few steps into the teleportation bay.

Beast began flicking switches and pounding on a keyboard that was attached to the massive teleporter via thick, black cables. Soon the X-Men heard a low hum as the device came to life, and the two mutants standing in the teleportation bay felt a slight vibration at their feet, which, paired with the unnatural static activity they were experiencing, made for a most uncomfortable sensation.

"There," Beast said with great satisfaction, "Now we only have to wait for the countdown to finish, and we will be off to Muir Island. This is all so very exciting, don't you agree?"

Beast turned to look at Wolverine and Colossus, but before they could answer they were startled by two large metal arms that extended from the sides of the teleporter and began to rotate around them. Wolverine noted the arms and smirked.

"What is it, Logan?" Beast asked.

"Aww, nothin'. Just that I half-expected this thing to have parts that spin around, or flash red and blue lights, or make annoying sounds and stuff like that. Would've been disappointed if it didn't."

Beast huffed and rolled his eyes, and then, careful to avoid the arms that were now spinning quite fast, joined his friends on the teleportation bay.

Cyclops, along with his wife, Jean Grey, and a few other mutants (including Iceman, Jubilee, Rogue, and Nightcrawler) sat with tense faces and crossed fingers, and looked on anxiously as their comrades approached the final moments before their departure.

"I will pick up the countdown at ten..." the three mutants' faces displayed a mixture of expressions. Beast had a look of pure excitement, like a schoolboy about to pin up his finest drawing on his parents' refrigerator. Wolverine looked bored, with his eyes half-lidded, lazily moving from person to person. Colossus looked both proud, but worried, his chest puffed out and his eyebrows raised in the center, like a Marine Corps cadet that was being chewed out by his drill sergeant.

"Ten..." the on-looking X-Men sat forward in anticipation.

"Nine... Eight... Seven..." Colossus glanced at Beast and Wolverine, a bead of sweat beginning to roll down his forehead.

"Six... Five... Four..." Cyclops clenched his fists until the

knuckles whitened, while Jean felt a weight in her stomach that grew with each descending number.

"Three... Two..."

"Good luck, X-Men." Cyclops whispered as Beast counted the final number.

"One!"

A moment after Beast finished the countdown, a giant ball of white light appeared in the center of the bay. The light flung tendrils of electricity in every direction, which connected with various objects in the room and showered the spectators with sparks.

"Something's not right!" Cyclops yelled and jumped to his feet. Reaching up to his visor, Cyclops placed his finger on the shutter release, ready to blast the control panel of the teleporter in order to save the three X-Men.

"Scott!" Rogue shouted, "You don't know what that will do to the -"

Rogue was cut short as the entire room went white and a crackling, whining noise filled the air, growing in pitch until all at once the chaos subsided. With spots in their eyes and ringing in their ears, Cyclops, Jean Gray, Iceman, Rogue, Jubilee and Nightcrawler searched the room for their friends, but found only a smoldering teleporter.

"Something went wrong, Jean, I just know it." Cyclops shook his head in despair. "Can you reach any of them telepathically?"

Jean closed her eyes and put her hand to her forehead, frowning. "N... no... I don't sense any of them." Jean's hand dropped and tears began to fill her eyes.

Cyclops spun around and began barking orders. "Kurt! Contact Muir Island and see if they've arrived! Jubilee, I need you to alert the other X-Men!" Cyclops then turned to his wife and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry, Jean, we'll get Forge and the Professor down here and figure out just what the hell happened to our friends."

2. A Good Teleportation Gone Bad

Immediately following the bright flash of white light, Beast, Wolverine and Colossus experienced a strange sense of weightlessness as their vision filled with a cascading stream of what appeared to be stars. None of the X-Men could see either of the others, and what little sound there was was muffled, as if they were hearing it from below the surface of a deep lake. The unnatural amount of static was also present, only now it grew to the almost painful feeling of pins and needles all over their bodies. The weightlessness continued, although it seemed as though they were traveling quite fast due to the countless bright spots racing downward all around them.

Although it seemed to the mutants an eternity, the experience only

lasted but a fraction of a second, and as a white light once again filled their vision, accompanied by the static crackling they heard prior to their departure, the travelers once again felt the effects of gravity, and soon found themselves in a dark, musty basement-like room. The walls about them were bare concrete and the ceiling was low, a solitary lightbulb hung unlit from the center. As their eyes adjusted to the darkness, the three men came to a horrid realization almost simultaneously: They were not on Muir Island.

"What... what happened?" Colossus was the first to speak.

"I'm not sure..." Beast answered distractedly as he spun around on his heel, taking in what little there was to see.

"Somethin's screwed up, that's fer sure." Wolverine said as he sniffed the air and clenched his fists, preparing for something bad to happen.

"Fascinating!" Beast said finally as he eyed the platform they were standing on. "It's a teleporter, although very different in design from the one I've constructed. From the appearance of this device's display screen, it was built by English-speaking people. That, at least, should be a good indication that we are not too far from home."

"Yeah, yeah," Wolverine muttered, "Let's just figure out where we are for sure before we go gettin' too comfortable. There's a door at the far end of the room with a light creepin' in through the bottom, so let's start there..."

Wolverine froze in place and put a finger to his lips, signaling the other two to be quiet. Beast, like Wolverine, could detect the sound of footsteps hurrying down a set of stairs with his super-sensitive hearing. Soon afterwards Colossus heard the footsteps as well as they drew nearer, towards the door Wolverine had mentioned moments before.

"Hide!" Beast hissed, but the burly Colossus narrowed his eyes at him, non-verbally asking Beast, "Where?"

The sound of footsteps stopped just beyond the door, only to be replaced by a muffled, "One, two, three!"

The door at the far end of the room crashed open as two middle-aged men came charging through, one armed with a pump-action shotgun and the other with a submachine gun. Wolverine growled and extended his long, adamantium claws and leapt forward to attack. The man with the shotgun raised his weapon and fired directly into Wolverine's torso, knocking him backwards from his mid-air lunge. Wolverine rolled across the floor until he hit the adjacent wall, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

Beast, with his lightning-fast reflexes, sprung sideways as soon as the first shot was fired, landing behind Colossus, who flexed his enormous frame and transformed instantly into an impenetrable organic steel. Startled by the sudden movement, the man with the submachine gun opened fire on Colossus, emptying an entire magazine at the shiny giant to no avail. After shrugging off several rounds from the submachine gun, Colossus charged at the two men, taking several rounds to the head and chest from the shotgun, which did nothing to

slow him down. Terrified, the two men dropped their weapons and turned to flee the room, only to feel the iron-grip of Colossus' hands on the backs of their necks. Colossus yanked the two men off their feet and slammed their backs to the nearest wall.

"Logan, are you alright?" the big man yelled over his shoulder as Beast scrambled over to attend to the wounded mutant.

"Yeah, I'm good." came the weak reply, much to the surprise of the two gunmen.

With an arm around Beast's shoulders, Wolverine struggled to his feet, his white t-shirt torn apart at the chest and soaked in blood. His flesh, however, seemed untouched, as if he were simply wearing the shirt of another man who had been shot at point-blank rang in the torso.

The gunmen looked over Colossus' shoulders with disbelief as they watched a man who by all rights should be laying dead on the floor get up and slowly walk towards them. Their astonishment soon turned to fear, however, as Colossus turned his attention back to the two of them, his metallic face twisted with anger. They felt his grip on their throats tighten and began to struggle for air when Beast interceded:

"Peter! Stop!" Colossus relaxed a little and turned to address the fury blue thing.

"But why?" he asked, "They are obviously trying to kill us!"

"He's right, Pete," Wolverine broke in, "we'll probably need these punks to explain what's going on here." Wolverine put a hand on the big Russian's shoulder, and Colossus released his grip on the men, letting them fall to the floor, gasping for air.

Beast approached and crouched down so that he was at eye level with the gunmen, clearly making them uncomfortable. "Who are you two, and why did you attack us?"

The two men looked at each other, asking with their eyes whether they should answer. Finally with a nod, the older-looking man spoke up. "My name is Doctor Anthony Markell, and I attacked because I thought you were... them."

"Them?" Beast asked, his eyebrows raised in curiosity, "Who do you mean by 'Them'?"

"The Combine," Markell replied, "We thought you were the Combine entering our facility through the teleporter. I can see now that you're not, but if that's true then who - or what - the hell are you?"

"We are the X-Men." Beast said proudly, expecting recognition to creep into their faces.

"X-Men?" Markell said, glancing over at his companion, "I'm not familiar with 'X-Men'."

The three mutants looked at each other, then returned their gaze to the two men. "The X-Men are an elite team of mutants who have devoted

their powers to promoting peace between humans and mutants." Beast explained. "You see, most of our kind are labeled as dangerous and savage, but we strive to educate mankind otherwise."

Beasts words seemed to only confuse the men further, their faces contorted with incomprehension.

Wolverine decided to get more information out of the men and changed the subject, saying, "What is this 'Combine' exactly? Maybe you oughta give the explainin' a shot."

The men's confusion turned to disbelief. "The Combine? You honestly don't know who the Combine are? Just where exactly did you three teleport from?" the younger man was the one asking the question, rubbing his hand over his nearly-crushed throat.

"Well, actually, we began the teleportation process in upstate New York," Beast answered, "Why? Where are we now?"

"City 17," Markell replied, "located in what used to be known as Eastern Europe. But if you really are from New York, then how do you survive the fallout?"

_Fallout... _Beast thought to himself, _There's no fallout in New York. What is he talking about? _It occurred to Beast that they were not on the same page. Neither of these men had heard of the world-famous X-Men, which surprised the three of them. But the two gunmen seemed even more shocked that they had not heard of this "Combine", whatever that was. The way Markell spoke about the Combine led Beast to believe that they were not a friendly bunch.

"Never mind that for now," Beast said to Markell, "Tell me more about the Combine and why this place was renamed 'City 17'. I have a theory, you see, about the nature of our current predicament, but in order to be sure I must know more. When I've learned enough, I'll tell you all you want to know about the three of us."

3. Hell Away from Home

Like the basement, the upper floors of the building were dark, musty, and cold. The five men sat in a tiny room that was bare except for two couches, a wooden chair, and a coffee table in the middle. On the table sat a small candle, who's light barely illuminated the faces of the five men that sat around it.

Dr. Markell and his friend, Joshua Bradshaw, sat across from the three rough-looking characters, speaking in mellow tones, explaining the condition of the world in which they now inhabited. The X-Men were shocked to learn that presently the entire world was dominated by an alien force that arrived mysteriously through a kind of portal storm, and that humans were now no more than prisoners on their own planet. Efforts were made to fight off the "Combine", as they were called, and liberate the planet from their grasp, but every attempt was thwarted with what seemed like little effort on the Combine's part. There were still those who opposed the Combine, however, and Dr. Markell and Mr. Bradshaw were two such men.

Dr. Markell, a Ph.D. in theoretical and metaphysics, was a research specialist and engineer at a top secret government facility called

"Black Mesa". Over a decade ago, the facility was struck by many catastrophic events, and was eventually destroyed. Markell was using his experience from Black Mesa to help construct a network of teleporters for the Resistance in their fight against the Combine, and it was to one such teleporter that the three X-Men had arrived.

"Fascinating," Beast exhaled, "It would seem as though we experienced a similar 'portal storm' at our headquarters during our teleportation, only we were not able to control this storm like the Combine were. The storm must have opened a portal at just the right time and place that it interrupted our transmission to our destination and instead sent us here. Taking into account the similarities of this world to ours - namely the geography and a few historical events - along with the differences - such as the complete absence of the X-Men and the presence of the Combine - I can only conclude that we have been teleported to some kind of parallel universe, one that shares many traits with our own universe, yet possesses some very different events. Simply fascinating!" Beast sat back and stared off into space thoughtfully.

"That's nice, Hank," Wolverine said after a short pause, "But how do we get back? These folks seem nice enough and all (aside from the whole shooting me in the chest thing), but I don't exactly want to stay here. This isn't where we belong."

"Da, I agree," Colossus chimed in, "we should start thinking about how we will be getting back."

"Well," Beast said, "Considering the fact that our teleport signal was highjacked by the storm and sent to a location that we have very little knowledge of, I don't know that we can find the right coordinates to send ourselves back to our universe. I am afraid that we might be trapped here... forever."

The other mutants dropped their shoulders and had looks of absolute despair on their faces, until Bradshaw spoke up, saying, "Well, Dr. McCoy, I'm not sure that's entirely true. You see, our teleporter saves the coordinates of all previous transmissions as well as receptions," Wolverine and Colossus sat up straight again, and Beast raised an eyebrow, showing his interest, "It's kinda like a call log, or that '69' you used to be able to dial. You guys had 69 in your universe, didn't you?"

The X-Men all smiled, and Wolverine said enthusiastically, "We sure did, bub!"

"There's only one problem," Markell broke in, "A couple weeks ago the transmitter on our teleporter was damaged by a power surge. We can receive incoming transmissions just fine, but we can't send any. An even bigger problem is that we don't have the materials we need to repair the transmitter, and it'll be hell trying to acquire them."

"Why is that?" Beast asked.

Markell sat forward and cleared his throat, then began explaining. "First of all, we need a large battery, like the ones you'd find in semi-trucks or large construction equipment. That actually won't be too hard to get a hold of - Bradshaw and I can make a trip to the

junkyard when it gets dark - but we also need a conductor, and that conductor needs to be a three-foot-long by one-inch in diameter solid gold coil. The only place that you can find one of those, I'm told, is the Combine Supply Depot at the Eastern edge of town. To say that the depot is heavily guarded would be an understatement, and we simply don't have the manpower to wrestle what we need from the Combine's greedy little paws."

The room was quiet for a while as the X-Men let that sink in. Beast and Wolverine had troubled looks on their faces, while Colossus looked enraged and impatient. Finally, unable to bear the silence any longer, the giant man stood, looming over those in the room, his head brushing the ceiling.

"We will go."

"What? You've gotta be kidding me," Markell laughed, "I know you guys have superpowers and everything, but you've gotta be crazy to assault such a heavily fortified structure with only three men. It's suicide."

"There is no other option," Colossus insisted, "They have what we need to go home, and so we must take it from them. I pity any man - yes, and even an army - who stands between Colossus and that which he wants most." and with that Colossus pounded the table with his fist, knocking over the candle and sending tremors through the floor.

"Pete's right," Wolverine said, "That fancy coil is as good as ours - you just need to point us in the right direction."

"I am quite confident in our abilities as well, Dr. Markell," Beast spoke up, "I'm sure we'll be able to procure what we need, no matter what the obstacle."

Markell sat back and stared at the three mutants thoughtfully, a hint of admiration in his eyes. "Alright," he said finally after a brief glance to Bradshaw, "I suppose I wouldn't mind having a fully-functioning teleporter again. That is, if you don't mind risking your necks to get it for me. Josh, if you wouldn't mind grabbing some street clothes for our friends here, I'll start filling them in on the Depot and how they're supposed to get that coil and get back here all in one piece. Crazy bastards, these mutants."

4. Plan of Attack

No more than an hour later the X-Men found themselves being briefed on the whereabouts of the Combine's Depot and were preparing to depart for their mission. As Markell wrapped things up, Bradshaw came clanking down the stairs, holding a pile of monotone blue clothing. Walking over to the nearest table, he plopped the pile down and sighed from exhaustion.

"I brought every uniform we had," said Bradshaw, "It's going to be quite a chore finding outfits for those two." Bradshaw gestured towards Beast and Colossus, who were both very large men.

"Uniforms?" Wolverine asked, "What's with that?"

"All citizens are required to wear these blue uniforms at all times," Markell answered, "Bradshaw and I don't wear them because we rarely go outside, and when we do, we're sure not to be seen, since we're kinda wanted by the Combine. These outfits, composed of a long-sleeved shirt and pants, belonged to citizens who have been... exterminated. You'll need to wear these so that you'll blend in better with the crowd. You won't get within a hundred yards of that Depot wearing what you're..." Markell's sentence trailed off as his gaze rested on Beast, a nearly six-foot tall bulky monster covered with blue fur. Beast was smiling at him, knowing exactly what he was thinking.

"I..." Markell began.

"It's quite alright, Dr. Markell," Beast said, "I've come to grips with my appearance. From your hesitation I gather that there is no way I'll be able to accompany my friends without drawing too much attention to them."

"That's... more than likely, I'm afraid. I'm sorry, Dr. McCoy - perhaps you can stay with Bradshaw and I, maybe give us your input on the construction of a new transmitter?" Markell looked hopeful, clearly eager to exchange ideas with a man so brilliant as Henry McCoy.

"I suppose," Beast sighed, "If I'm not able to aid in the acquisition of the necessary materials, I might as well contribute to the quality of the product."

"Very good," Markell said, not hiding his excitement, "Now let's get those two suited up. As Bradshaw said, it will be difficult finding a uniform that will fit the Russian fellow, since there have been few - if any - citizens of City 17 that have been even close to his size. He looks to be over seven feet tall, and the closest we have to that is a uniform that belonged to old Ruben, who stood about six-foot-six. We'll have to make some modifications."

"Yeah," Wolverine added as he slipped on a uniform that fit almost perfectly, "plus, Pete here puts on a few hundred pounds when he goes metal. Might wanna give him some extra breathing room in case we end up in a scrap."

Colossus nodded his agreement as he held up the shirt of the uniform Markell had just mentioned. "Okay," Markell said, "Bradshaw, see what you can do. I'll work on fabricating a couple of relocation coupons for our friends here - the train station on the East Side should get them within walking distance of the Depot, don't you think?"

Bradshaw nodded as he took the shirt and pants from Colossus and made his way upstairs. Markell pulled up a chair in front of one of the half-dozen computers in the basement and began clicking the keys. Beast turned to his friends and rolled out the map they had been reviewing, then beckoned them to come closer.

"Let's go over the plan one more time, gentlemen."

As the train chugged along, nearing its destination, Wolverine and Colossus sat quietly in their seats, trying not to be noticed. Despite the fact, however, everyone on the train, including what the pair assumed were Combine guards, seemed to be staring at them the

>whole time. The short, stocky, hairy-looking man was interesting enough, but the large, angry-looking Russian chap was a sight for sure. Everyone continued to stare as the train began to slow down and pull into the station. The X-Men noticed the guards grip their batons even more tightly than before, and they stood straight and alert as the two rose to exit the passenger car. Wolverine noticed that each guard they passed sucked in their breath as they approached, and then exhaled their relief as they passed. The Combine were clearly afraid of them.<p>

Colossus and Wolverine filed out of the train into a station very similar to the one in which they boarded the train hours earlier. Combine police stood blocking every doorway, holding their menacing-looking batons and watching the citizens mill about like cattle. Almost every officer in the room, along with most of the citizens, turned their heads to stare at the strange pair that had just stepped off of the in-bound train. The X-Men approached the exit they were instructed to take by Markell, only to be cut off by two guards who hurried to occupy the doorway, their glowing batons held at waist-height.

"Halt!" one of the guards rumbled as a pair of cameras dropped from the ceiling to snap several pictures of them. "Let's see your coupons, citizens!"

Wolverine and Colossus each handed the officer their ticket, and the sinister looking character snatched them from their hands impatiently. The guard looked from the mutants to their tickets, then back to the mutants. He seemed to be paying special attention to the enormous Colossus, as he had to crane his neck backwards in order to see his face. Colossus tried his best to appear as docile as a kitten.

"Everything seems to be in order," growled the officer, "go on through."

The pair noticed the cameras snap several more pictures of them before the two guards stepped aside to let them through. The mutants came to a set of double-doors with light shinning through the cracks. With a quick glance behind them, they pushed open the doors and walked out into the street.

The pair squinted and shielded their eyes against the rising sun. The street was abuzz with commotion, citizens wearing blue uniforms and Combine police wearing uniforms of their own walked up and down the street, now then disappearing into a multi-story building or walking through a strange blue force field. Markell had informed them to head South from there, so South they went, drawing the attention of several passer-bys. After a good half-hour of walking they finally came to the junction they had been looking for. They took the East route and walked on for no more than five minutes until they finally saw the depot.

"Whoa," Wolverine sighed as he took it all in. The Eastside Depot was

just as Markell and Bradshaw had described it: At least seventy stories high, with enormous garage doors that looked like they could accommodate a battleship, and Combine police and combat soldiers everywhere, sporting what seemed to be very large assault rifles. They also noticed the little floating cameras, "scanners" as Markell had called them, buzzing and whirring about, taking pictures of everything.

"Looks like we're in for quite a ride, Petey." Wolverine muttered to his friend.

"Da. This will be more difficult than I had imagined." Colossus said as he looked up and down, then side to side at the massive structure.

The rumble of a supply train caught their attention and they watched as the unusually large locomotive made its way toward the Depot from the West, carrying thousands of tons of equipment. Colossus followed its movements with his eyes, and then nudged Wolverine and pointed to a small entrance on the far side of the Depot where citizens in blue uniforms were being herded in by Combine police.

"That should be the labor entrance," Colossus said, "We should get our documents ready before we get there." Wolverine nodded and reached into the pocket of his blue pants and withdrew a folded piece of paper.

As they approached the entrance, several guards turned their heads to study the two X-Men, some of them switching the safeties off on their rifles.

"We're here to work in the loading docks," Wolverine said as he handed the guard their forged labor documents.

"Finally the replacements get here!" Another guard piped in, "We've been way behind ever since the last crew was crushed by that loader!"

The rest of the soldiers roared with laughter. "And this one," another guard said as he slapped Colossus on the shoulder, "This one looks as if he could replace the whole crew himself!" There was more laughter as the first guard opened the door and motioned them through. Colossus was staring at the comparatively miniature man who had slapped him and considered tearing his head off. Wolverine caught his gaze and shook his head ever so slightly, warning him against the impulse.

The guard behind Colossus shoved him hard, which barely budged him from his spot, and growled, "Move along, tiny! We've got a fresh trainload to move inside!" The mutants looked at each other briefly and then moved through the open door, as the sound of the soldiers' laughter was cut off suddenly by the slam of the door behind them.

Inside, Colossus and Wolverine found themselves meandering through aisles and checkpoints, eventually making their way to a chain-link fence where several other blue-uniformed citizens were lined up, staring at the ground while a Combine soldier marched up and down their ranks, growling orders at them before they moved on to the loading docks.

Wolverine tapped Colossus on the arm and nodded to an industrial-sized elevator on the other side of the chain-link fence. That, the mutants assumed, was the central elevator that would take them to the broadcasting floor, several stories up, which was where Markell had told them they would be able to find their gold coil. Exactly how they were going to get the coil and get out, they hadn't figured out yet, but at least they knew the next step.

It was obvious that citizens were not allowed near the elevator without a Combine escort, so they couldn't simply walk up to the elevator and ride to their floor, since the Combine had eyes in every corner of the building. Colossus' heart began pounding while he tried to think of a way to reach the elevator, when Wolverine grabbed his arm and began pulling him in that very direction.

"Logan, what are you -"

"Cool it!" Wolverine hissed. "Look."

Colossus turned his gaze to where Wolverine had motioned and noticed four citizens being escorted to the elevator by a handful of Combine. He paid special attention to a tall, African-American man who was mumbling and glaring at the soldiers who were prodding him on.

"Man, this is the third time this week you fools put me on Assembly Duty," the man complained, "I heard about what happened to those poor fellas who were burned alive by the fusion machine, and you keeping me on Assembly Duty only increases the chances of something like that happening to me! I thought they were going to send someone in to replace me for that job anyway â€“ I'm supposed to be out on the dock unloading supplies from the Citadel!"

"Quiet, citizen!" one of the guards yelled as he drew his baton and gave the man a shove. The man would have lost his balance and fallen on his face, but Colossus reached out and caught him by the arm.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" The guard asked Colossus as he flicked on a white spark of electricity at the end of his baton. With his brows knitted and a look of pure hatred on his face, Colossus opened his mouth to curse the guard when Wolverine spoke up.

"We're his replacements for Assembly Duty. Sorry we're late."

"'Bout damn time," the man broke in, "See? Told you I was supposed to be on the docks."

The guards paused for a moment and looked from the two mutants to the irate man. Finally one of them motioned for another to escort the man to the loading docks.

"Very well," the soldier said, "Let's get moving! Get on that elevator, citizens!"

Wolverine shot a half-smile at Colossus as he followed the soldiers to the elevator doors and climbed aboard. Colossus let out a sigh of relief and joined him.

6. Acquisition

Colossus stood motionless as they ascended, paying careful attention to the indicator panel that would tell them which floor to get off on. Occasionally the elevator would stop and more citizens and Combine would get on, but it seemed like it would take forever for them to reach the floor labeled "Broadcasting Floor".

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the Broadcasting Floor label was illuminated, and the elevator stopped to let more passengers on. So overcome with relief was Colossus that he went to step out of the elevator without even thinking.

"Halt, citizen!" Came the familiar voice of the soldier behind him. Colossus paused for a moment, hearing the soldier hurry to catch up. "The Assembly Floor is a few stories up still â€“ get back on the elevator!"

Colossus flexed his arms in anger, remaining on that very spot while he pondered his next move. Wolverine tried to look indifferent to the whole situation, but he too was anxious to find a way off the elevator.

"You heard me, pal. Get back on the elevator, or I'll _make _you get back on." The guard raised his baton and ignited the end with a spark. Colossus refused to move.

"Fine, have it your way." The guard swung his arm back and struck Colossus right between the shoulders, causing him to stumble forward and grunt loudly in pain. The big Russian regained his composure and again stood there motionless, hoping the guard would just leave him be. He was not so fortunate, however, as the guard took a second swing, this time at Colossus' rib cage. Colossus let out a pitiful "ummpf!" and dropped to one knee as the guards started chuckling.

"Looks like we got ourselves a tough guy here!" One of them yelled as he encouraged his comrade to strike again.

Wolverine grimaced as the guard with the baton raised his arm to strike Colossus in the head, but just as the blow fell Colossus turned and caught the soldier's wrist with his own massive paw. The soldier struggled to tear free, but to no avail, causing the other guards to draw their pistols and close in on Colossus. Knowing that there was no turning back now, Colossus decided to make a stand. With an effortless flick of his wrist, Colossus twisted the guard's arm a full three-hundred-and-sixty degrees, shattering the bones in his forearm like sugar crystal.

The guard screamed in pain and fell to the floor as the soldiers took aim at the giant. Colossus narrowed his eyes at his adversaries and transformed into his metallic form, just in time to see a storm of bullets ricochet off his body.

Wolverine, reluctant to blow their cover so soon, finally resolved to help his comrade as he drew his razor sharp claws and leapt for the nearest guard. The first blow sunk deep into the soldier's left shoulder, causing him to give a grunt of pain and drop his weapon. As he turned to face his attacker, the soldier was met by a flash of

metal as Wolverine's claws sliced his face, throat and chest to ribbons. Wolverine then discarded the dead body and took out another guard with a blow to the face just as he turned to investigate the sound of the dying soldier.

The sounds of gunfire were slowly subsiding as Colossus began smashing skulls with his bare hands and Wolverine started slashing through necks and torsos. The two remaining guards, finally realizing the futility of their efforts, slipped past Colossus and began running to find help. They were only a few meters away from an alarm switch on the wall when Colossus grabbed Wolverine and heaved him at the fleeing soldiers, sending the mutant's body whistling through the air like a dart. In less than a second Wolverine closed in on the guards, planting a set of claws in each one's back and knocking them forward from the momentum of Colossus' throw. The two Combine soldiers were killed on impact.

"What now?" Colossus asked his friend, but he noticed that Wolverine was looking at something behind Colossus, and so he turned around to find several citizens huddled together in a corner of the elevator, eyes wide with fear.

"It's alright," Colossus tried to explain, "We will not harm you."

"You don't understand," one of them stuttered, "they're going to kill us all now! You don't know what you've d-"

The woman's voice was cut short as the doors to the elevator slammed shut and the car began its descent. Someone on another floor had called the elevator down, most likely to bring up reinforcements. The alarms that suddenly shrieked to life confirmed their theory.

"Crap, Pete!" Wolverine yelled, "Now the whole damn place is after us. We better get that coil and get outta here before-"

"Halt!" Several voices said at once as a dozen or so guards filled the far end of the hall. They raised their pulse rifles at the X-Men, expecting at first to take them prisoner. Then they noticed the pile of bodies lying about the mutants' feet, and instead decided to open fire.

Wolverine snatched up the two bodies near him and used them as shields while Colossus charged at the soldiers full speed, ignoring their gunfire as if it were simply a swarm of harmless insects. When the big Russian thundered past him, Wolverine threw off the bodies and began following in his wake. The two were closing in on the soldiers when one raised his weapon and fired some kind of grey, cylindrical object directly at Colossus' chest. Wolverine caught a glimpse of the projectile and roared "Grenade!" only moments before impact.

The Combine ceased fire as the grenade met its target with an explosion of flames and a great cloud of black smoke. One of the soldiers chuckled and slapped his partner on the back, congratulating him on his successful kill. The others joined in the laughter as they fed fresh magazines into their weapons, preparing to investigate the remains. Their laughter stopped dead as an enormous, angry figure emerged from the dissipating cloud of smoke.

Colossus' shirt was gone, except for the ends of his sleeves that hung from his wrists in a tattered mess. Smoke curled off of the remaining fabric on his arms, as well as the waist band of his pants, blackened by the sudden burst of fire. Other than that, however, there was not a single scratch or burn anywhere on his shiny metallic body.

The Combine soldiers were stunned â€“ so much so that they were not able to react in time when Colossus charged at them once more.

In only a few great strides, Colossus reached the squad of Combine soldiers and, with a great sweeping motion, executed a powerful backhand blow that knocked them all off their feet. The soldiers scrambled to reach their weapons as Wolverine leapt into the middle of their stumbling masses and dispatched most of them with a flurry of razor-sharp claws. The few who managed to escape Wolverine were crushed under the mighty heels of Colossus as they tried to crawl away. Once again, the hallway was silent, except for the shrieking alarm.

"Won't be long before more of 'em start pourin' back in here," Wolverine said, "We better find what we need and leave."

Colossus nodded and began searching the doors up and down the hallway, trying to figure out where the coil would be kept. Wolverine scanned the area as well, his forehead wrinkled in confusion. There were no labels on any of the doors, and they all looked identical. Wolverine decided to open a few, only to find a console and a large screen crowding a tiny room behind every door, each with some kind of radio chatter going on that didn't seem to make any sense to him. Wolverine tried more doors, only to be met by the same sights and sounds. Finally he came to a thick, metal door with a security keypad on the wall next to it.

"This looks promising," Wolverine muttered as he tried the handle, "Lockedâ€¦ of course. Couldn't expect it to be _that _easy." He glanced down the hall at Colossus, who was now investigating the identical rooms at his end of the hall. Wolverine then turned to look at the floor indicator on the panel next to the elevator door. Combine reinforcements were just a few floors down, rising fast.

"I don't have time for this crap," Wolverine growled as the claws on his right hand slid out with a "sssshunk!"

The mutant raised his hand above his head, tightening his muscles and preparing to strike. Colossus glanced down the hall just in time to see Wolverine slam his clawed fist into the door jam, slicing through the bolts like paper. Curious, Colossus made his way toward Wolverine with a hopeful look on his face.

"What is this?" the Russian asked as Wolverine yanked open the heavy door.

"Dunno. Looks important, though, since they put a security pad on it. Let's go take a look."

The two stepped inside a room that was several times the size of the rooms they had previously searched. The walls were lined with racks and shelves, and there were several large metal chests lying on the floor, boasting massive locks and hinges on the lids that covered

their tops. The room was definitely some kind of supply cabinet, as the racks and shelves were filled with all sorts of strange electronic components. None of these items looked familiar to either of the mutants, except for the row of rifles and ammunition that hung from the far wall.

"Check these boxes." Wolverine said to Colossus as he nodded towards the large metal chests.

The X-Men approached the line of chests and began opening them, despite their heavy locks. Wolverine cut through the locks and hinges and then pried off the heavy lids, while Colossus simply tore the lids off with his bare hands, as if he were opening tupperware. The two had opened all but three when they heard the elevator down the hall reach their floor. They looked at each other wide-eyed with panic. Colossus grit his teeth and ripped open one last box, then stopped dead and gazed open-mouthed at its contents. Wolverine hurried over to see.

"Jackpot, Pete!" Wolverine said as he lifted two gold coils from their foam casing in the chest. Inside lay four more.

"Take them all!" Colossus rasped, noting the hurried footsteps that were heading down the hall, directly towards them.

The X-Men piled all of the coils back into the chest, and then Colossus lifted the massive thing and tucked it under his arm like a football, as if it only weighed a couple pounds, instead of a couple hundred.

"After you!" Wolverine said to Colossus with a smirk.

Colossus exited the room and turned the corner to find at least twenty Combine soldiers storming down the hall, rifles raised and ready to fire. Their entire company came to a halt not fifteen feet from where Colossus stood. Wolverine slipped out of the storage room and hid behind the hulking frame of his fellow mutant.

"Drop the uh box, and put your hands on your head!" The soldier nearest to them shouted.

Colossus sighed and rolled his eyes, tiring of this routine. He glanced over his shoulder to Wolverine, who merely shrugged and raised his eyebrows; then to the box under his arm; and then to the crowd of soldiers who were all shouting angrily and pointing their guns at him. A sinister smile crept across Colossus' face, which immediately made the soldiers very nervous.

"Open fire! Bring it down!" The lead soldier yelled as the Combine in the front dropped to one knee to avoid the gunfire from behind.

The hallway once again erupted in a blaze of fire from the muzzles of several weapons, which sent bullets bouncing off Colossus' body in every direction. Colossus maintained his evil-looking grin as he drew his arm back, holding the massive chest in one hand. A few of the Combine, realizing what was about to come next, ceased fire and turned to run, just as Colossus hurled the large metal box right into the middle of the attacking soldiers.

The chest demolished over half of their numbers, leaving the rest

stunned and injured. The X-Men then charged through and finished off the survivors, Colossus snatching up the chest on his way through. The two reached the elevator and Wolverine slammed his fist on the "Ground Floor" button as they scrambled inside. The doors slid shut and the X-Men both let out sighs of relief as they began their descent. The only thing left to do now was to make it back to Markell's hideout with the coils in one piece.

7. Mutants on a Rail

The X-Men found their departure to be much easier than they had anticipated. They met some opposition along the way, the toughest of which they experienced as they tried to exit the Depot. Oddly enough, the soldiers they came against acted surprised to see intruders from inside, yet they were very alert, as if expecting an assault from outside. Regardless, the X-Men had little trouble breaking out of the building and continuing on their way.

As they traversed the city streets, the mutants noticed they were now the only ones in sight. A few more hours ago the streets were filled with civilians and Combine alike, but presently they were no where to be found. So the two walked on in silence, which was broken only on occasion by the sound of distant gunshots. Wolverine and Colossus would shoot each other curious looks every now and then as they heard the battle from far away, but neither could come up with an explanation.

Finally, after turning down the familiar street to the train station and walking for what seemed like forever, the X-Men reached the station. Upon investigation, Wolverine and Colossus soon realized that the station appeared to be abandoned. There were no inbound or outbound trains to be seen, and the place was completely devoid of any life.

"Wonderful," Colossus said as he sat down the chest he was carrying, "No trains in sight. It will take us at least a day or more to reach Markell and Beast on foot. That is a very long walk through very dangerous territory for two wanted men." Colossus could see that in the heat of the afternoon, his friend was dripping with sweat. He surveyed his own skin, which was currently a shiny, indestructible metal, and realized that his resistance to the heat had kept him from noticing his companion's fatigue.

"I'm fine," Wolverine answered Colossus' unasked question, "We better get moving. Sooner we get that teleporter running and back to the Mansion the better."

Colossus nodded and bent down to pick up the chest when he noticed something floating not too far away. Wolverine followed his gaze and then cursed under his breath.

"Scanners," Wolverine grumbled and turned to beckon to Colossus, "Come on, Pete, we—" the mutant stopped in mid-sentence as he heard a series of clicking noises directly behind them. The pair turned just in time to be temporarily blinded by the flash of a scanner that was hovering just above where they stood.

"Ach!" Colossus yelled and swung the rectangular box at the scanner, smacking it away like a baseball. The floating object soared into the

distance before smashing to pieces against an iron support beam.

"Nice shot, kid," Wolverine grinned, "but I'm guessing they now know where we are. Let's beat it!"

Colossus and Wolverine jumped down onto the railroad tracks and started off in the direction of Markell's hide-out. Behind them they heard the faint sounds of alarms kicking on and knew that their solitude would not last much longer. With that, they began running at full speed, Wolverine moving quickly but lightly like a gazelle, and Colossus thundering alongside him like a charging elephant, leaving large footprints in the firm ground. They sprinted for quite a while before Wolverine stopped and turned to look behind them.

"Looks like we've got company." Wolverine said as Colossus stopped just a few feet ahead of him.

Not five-hundred yards away were two enormous armored vehicles heading straight for them traveling at least eighty miles an hour. The vehicles looked to be standard Combine Armored Personnel Carriers, but modified to travel on railroad tracks. As the APCs drew nearer, the mutants noticed gun turrets mounted atop each vehicle, the barrels of which swiveled to aim directly at them. The X-Men stood there motionless, not sure of what to do next. The Combine didn't give them much time to contemplate, however, as the APC on the left-most track began hurling bullets at them, followed by the APC on the right.

"Pete!" Wolverine yelled as he attempted to race towards the big mutant for cover. He was only five feet away when a swarm of bullets bit into his flesh, knocking him on his face. Wolverine grimaced and reached out a hand for Colossus, who quickly grabbed him by the wrist and swung his body around so he was shielded by the metal mutant's body.

Both vehicles were now firing their turrets at the mutants, the brunt of which was taken by Colossus while Wolverine's accelerated healing factor closed his wounds and refueled his energy. While they were still under fire, Colossus stormed towards the nearest APC, heading for its right flank. Upon reaching his prey, the big mutant reached down and grabbed the bottom edge of the large vehicle, and with the effortlessness of a child tossing a balloon up in the air, he lifted it off the tracks and sent it sailing far and high, until it hit a building several hundred yards away, demolishing the wall and several floors of the multi-story structure.

This suddenly made the driver of the second vehicle much wiser, and instead of trying to destroy Colossus he decided to flee. The wheels on the APC began rolling forward, but the vehicle remained in its place as Colossus leapt forward and grabbed hold of its rear bumper. The wheels ground against the rails, making an unpleasant screeching noise. Colossus was about to send this one skyward as well when Wolverine, fully recovered from his injuries, jumped on the roof and brandished his claws.

The turret on the roof turned to blast the mutant at pointblank range, but not before Wolverine amputated it with a quick sweep of his claws. As Colossus continued to hold the vehicle in place, Wolverine cut open the manhole on the roof as if he were opening a

giant can of soup, slicing around the hatch in a swift circular motion. Wolverine then kicked the lid off and bent over the hole, just as a pistol shot was heard from within and a cloud of blood puffed out from the mutant's shoulder. Ignoring the pain, Wolverine dove through the opening head-frist.

From where he stood, Colossus could hear cries of pain escape from the manhole and the PAC as well as the "thud!" of bodies being slammed against the inside of the armored hull. Within seconds the sounds stopped and Wolverine climbed out of the manhole, dragging two dead Combine soldiers up with him. He let them drop over the side of the vehicle and then turned to smile at Colossus, who had released his grip on the APC as soon as Wolverine had taken out its driver. Colossus raised his eyebrows in question.

"Hey, Pete," Wolverine yelled, "I found us a ride home."

8. Bad, Bad News

The size of the metal box containing the stolen goods made it impossible to fit through the opening on the APC, so the mutants had no choice but to empty its contents directly into the vehicle and then discard the empty box on the railway. Once they were inside with their cargo, Wolverine fired up the engine and stomped on the accelerator, taking them west, towards the hideout that they had teleported to.

The APC proved to be much faster than the locomotive they had ridden earlier, and so they arrived at their destination in slightly more than half the time it took to reach the Depot. As they neared the station, the X-Men noticed a train moving along the same track as they were, about a half-mile away. The train began growing in size rapidly, and they soon realized that they were on course for a head-on collision. Wolverine cursed and slammed on the brakes, bringing the APC to a screaming halt. In the distance they could hear the train's horn blasting away, warning them of its approach. The mutants scrambled out of the vehicle and bolted off the tracks, leaving the APC to its fate.

As they left the railway and headed into the streets, the X-Men noticed that this side of the city was much more active, as it was swarming with scanners and combine APCs. The two were careful not to be seen, ducking behind dumpsters and traveling through alleys rather than the busy streets. The sounds of gunfire that seemed so faint on the East Side were now much louder, as if only blocks away. The X-Men wondered just who exactly was involved - the Combine was a give, but there didn't seem to be any citizens with enough backbone to fight against them. All their ponderings were put to rest when they emerged from an alleyway to find several dead bodies, both Combine and civilian, outfitted for combat.

"Well now, looks like we're finally gettin' a little help from the locals." Wolverine said, "'Bout time."

"Da," Colossus agreed, "but it is a shame that they are not so fitted for combat as their adversaries. So many dead civilians, and not as many dead Combine."

Wolverine nodded, "It's a shame for sure, but remember this ain't our

world, and it ain't our fight. Our priority is to get home and continue our fight."

With that, Wolverine started off towards Markell's hideout, keeping to the shadows of the streets. Colossus followed with his head hung in mourning for the fallen. For several blocks down they encountered the same sights: Civilian bodies, some still gripping their weapons, strewn about, with only a fraction of Combine bodies to accompany them. The battle here seemed over, or else it had merely moved on into the distance where they heard continued gunfire. Finally, after trudging through countless bodies and battle scenes, they came to the street that Markell, Beast and Bradshaw were hiding. The two stopped dead in their tracks when they saw Markell's building.

Once a seven-story hotel, the structure that Markell had made his haven was now leveled, the shattered walls and fallen rubble charred-black and smoldering from what was probably some kind of explosion. There were many civilian casualties in front and around where the building had been, as they were trying to protect it in its moment of peril. The X-Men stood in horror, open-mouthed and unable to move or speak for their shock.

"No..." Colossus whispered after some time, "No! This cannot be! How are we to return now? We are trapped in this hell forever!" With that the Russian swung his fist at a light pole, simultaneously transforming into his metallic form. The pole snapped like balsa wood and came clattering to the ground, cracking the concrete below. Wolverine stood there with his fists clenched, his eyes fixed on the smokey remains of the hotel. Rage flashed through his eyes as the veins in his neck and forehead stood out like shards of lightning against a stormy sky. He was about to let loose himself when he heard a groan from underneath a nearby car. Both mutants stopped and stared.

The groan came again, this time accompanied by a cry for help. With a quick glance to each other, the mutants ran toward the source of the sound. Colossus carefully lifted the car up and moved it aside while Wolverine crouched down to investigate the survivor. It was Bradshaw.

The man coughed and sputtered as blood trickled from his lips, his body a mangled mess, torn to ribbons by what looked to be a sharpnel explosion. He stirred and opened his eyes at the sudden exposure to light and smiled faintly when he saw the X-Men leaning over him. He struggled to speak.

"It... it's you. Mmm... McCoy said you'd make it." Wolverine held Bradshaw's head up to look him in the eye and help him breathe.

"We tried... to... hold them off... to buy some time while... while Markell and McCoy escaped." Bradshaw's eyes began to roll back into his sockets, but Wolverine gave him a slight shove to keep him conscious.

"Josh," Wolverine whispered, "Josh, come on! Hang in there! Tell me what happened to Hank and Markell."

Bradshaw straightened up ever so slightly, suddenly determined to live long enough to tell his story. In a weak and restricted voice, he recalled the incident. Apparently, there was a resistance fighter

- a man by the name of Dr. Gordon Freeman - who penetrated the Combine prison called "Nova Prospekt". Freeman destroyed the compound in a massive explosion and thus marked the beginning of the violent overthrow of the Combine. Every where in City 17, citizens took up arms and began the assault. Markell and Beast were treating wounded resistance fighters at their hideout, which unfortunately made them a strategic target for the Combine forces. The soldiers brought the fight to Markell's doorstep, and when they defeated the outside resistance they stormed inside to finish off its occupants. The Combine discovered the basement laboratory where Beast and Markell were preparing the make a run for it. The two were taken captive, and the teleporter - their only hope of escaping this nightmare - was destroyed on sight. Bradshaw didn't catch where they were taking them, but as he lay wounded underneath the wrecked car, he overheard the leader of the soldiers ordering the troops to "Keep the human and the creature alive, and demolish the building".

Colossus grimaced at the news, while Wolverine sighed in relief. "They're still alive, then?" he asked, to which Bradshaw nodded.

"My guess is that they took them to the Citadel," Bradshaw whispered, "where they'll most likely experiment on Dr. McCoy, and interrogate Markell." The man struggled to say each word, and his breathing became much more strained. Colossus and Wolverine knew he didn't have much longer to live, but there was nothing either of them could do about it.

"How do we get to the Citadel?" Wolverine asked quietly, "We need to rescue our friends. Please, tell us where it is!"

Bradshaw smiled weakly and laid back his head. He slowly extended his arm back so that it was pointing directly behind him. The mutants followed the direction of his arm tot he horizon and saw the giant spire they had been wondering about since they left for the Depot. With that, Bradshaw exhaled loudly and passed away, leaving the mutants glaring at their enemy's headquarters with hate.

"Let's get going, Pete." Wolverine broke the silence after a few moments.

"We cannot go home," Colossus said blankly, still staring at the Citadel, "we cannot go home, they have destroyed our teleporter! We're cursed to live in this miserable place forever!"

"Maybe," Wolverine replied, "maybe we'll never see our world again, never set foot in the X-Mansion or see the rest of our friends, but..." the mutant's body tensed, his voice barely a growl, "They've got Hank, and he's the only other member of the X-Men we'll ever see again; the only family we've got in this hellhole. And I'll be damned if I let them make a lab rat outta that furball."

Colossus nodded, stirred by Wolverine's words, "Da, comrade. Now we storm the villains' castle, yes?"

"Damn right," Wolverine snarled, "Bastards don't know what's commin'"

The X-Men traveled for hours, if not days, through the ruined city streets, occasionally looking up to the gargantuan Citadel to keep their bearings. The sounds of gunfire grew louder by the minute, but somehow seemed to always be a few blocks ahead of them, as if the battle were moving in the same direction as they were traveling. This seemed even more likely as they passed several areas that had seen heavy combat: some ending in Combine victory, others in Resistance victory.

Before long, the mutants came to a wide canal that cut off their path in a perpendicular fashion. The gunfire seemed imminent now, and after a few seconds of scanning the area, Wolverine spotted the muzzle blasts of several submachine guns down in the bottom of the canal. If there were resistance fighters down there engaging the Combine, they would most likely welcome a little help. Without a word, the X-Men dropped down to the bottom of the deep canal, immediately noticing the railroad tracks that stretched the entire length.

"This ain't the same track we took the Depot earlier," Wolverine muttered, "must be the route for the supply train we saw when we passed the loading docks." The thought was quickly pushed from his mind as Colossus charged toward the firefight, eager to create more piles of Combine bodies.

As they neared the battle, the X-Men realized that the submachine gun fire was coming from a small squad of Resistance fighters, who were taking cover behind piles of rubble between shots. Wolverine and Colossus looked ahead, trying to see what they were shooting at. The other end of the canal looked perfectly clear, with no enemies in sight. Colossus turned to look at Wolverine, but just as he did, the both of them heard the quick, high-pitched whistle of a bullet as Colossus was struck directly in the forehead by a round from a high-powered rifle, knocking his head back and causing him to stumble backwards a couple steps.

"Sniper!" Wolverine yelled as he ducked behind the pillar of a bridge that crossed the canal. Colossus shook his head, as if clearing it from a particularly violent sneeze, just as another round smacked him in the shoulder. The giant turned to see where it was coming from, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand and squinting into the distance.

"You see'um, Pete?" Wolverine yelled from behind the pillar.

"Niet," Colossus replied, "But I think he may be-"

Colossus was interrupted by another bullet that zinged off his head, this time having little effect on his balance since he was expecting it. He immediately strained his eyes to see in the direction from which he thought the bullet had come, but saw nothing. There was a dark tunnel at the far end of the canal, littered with abandoned vehicles and rubble. The sniper could have been anywhere in that darkness, but Colossus couldn't make out exactly where. It was possible that the sniper was using some kind of flash suppressor to hide the muzzle blast of his rifle, which meant he would have to get much closer to find him.

Colossus waited a few minutes, waiting for the sniper to fire again, but there were no further attacks, so he decided to make his way

toward the Resistance fighters. He nodded down the canal after making eye contact with Wolverine, then set off at a job to the huddled gunmen. His great footfalls made plenty of noise, and before he was twenty yards from the civilians, one of them caught sight of him and yelled, "Behind you! They're attacking from behind!"

The panicked squad turned and unloaded on the intruder, to which Colossus responded by raising his arms in the air, showing he was unarmed. This comforted the civilians very little as their shots bounced off of the monster like pebbles, having no effect. Colossus attempted to yell over the sound of automatic gunfire, trying to convince the combatants to stop. Finally, a few of them had to reload, which Colossus took as an opportunity to explain himself.

"Do not shoot, I will not harm you!" he pleaded, "I am a friend of Dr. Markell's â€“ we are on _your_ side. Please, trust me!"

The group of humans passed suspicious looks around the six of them, debating on whether or not they should resume shooting at the large metal man in front of them. Colossus remained where he stood, not wanting to frighten them into attacking him again. Finally, one of the two women in the group spoke up.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded as she gripped her weapon.

"Please, my name is Piotr Rasputin," Colossus answered, "and I assure you I am here to help. You cannot hurt me, and I promise that I will do no harm to you. We must talk."

"Forgive us for still being suspicious," the woman said sarcastically, still aiming her reloaded weapon at the Russian's head, "but it is a bit alarming when one witnesses a person sustain fire from automatic weapons, especially when that person does not die as a result. Care to explain _that_, Mr. Rasputin?"

"It isâ€¦ complicated," Colossus began, "but now is no time to explain. I realize that there is a sniper in the area, and I assume that is what you are both hiding from and shooting at."

"Yeah," the woman replied, not letting Colossus out of her sights, "One of our men is pinned down under some fallen rubble â€“ the result of a wayward grenade explosion â€“ just a few hundred yards down the canal, right on the tracks. We tried to get him out, but the sniper drove us back here behind the rocks. Anyone who so much as stick an arm out from behind these barriers would get it blown off, so we've been taking blind shots at him in hopes of scaring him offâ€¦ whichâ€¦ as I'm just now realizing, sounds like an incredibly stupid tacticâ€¦"

"Ah," Colossus smiled, "he has shot me several times. But as you too have learned, bullets bother me very little. I think he is now conserving his ammunition." The civilians still did not seem to trust him, so Colossus attempted to gain their trust.

"I will go down the tracks and retrieve your friend, and then you will see that I am not an enemy. We will show you that you have nothing to fear from us."

The Resistance fighters all shared the same confused look, "We?" one of them said, "Us? How many of you are there?"

"Just two." Wolverine spoke up as he leaned around Colossus. Unaware of his presence before, the surprised humans jerked their weapons toward the newcomer. Indeed, even Colossus didn't know how he had made it there unseen by either the humans or the sniper. The larger mutant spread his arms to protect his friend from gunfire.

"No! No! He is a friend as well. His name is Logan, and he cameâ€¢!" Colossus's voice trailed off as he and the rest of those near him heard the rumbling and whistling of an approaching train. The civilians all had horrified looks on their faces, their color drained.

"Oh my God," one of the women cried, "Kevin! He'll be crushed!"

The mutants turned to face the direction from which they had come and saw in distance a Combine supply train, much bigger and more heavily armored than the passenger trains they had seen earlier. The train was not far away and traveling fast. Colossus turned to look for the immobilized civilian when Wolverine grabbed him by the shiny shoulder.

"Pete! The kid is too far away!" he growled, "You won't be able to make it there before the train does."

"No!" one of the men in the group shouted, "For the love of God, you can't let him die! Please, do something!" Several of the other civilians were forced to tackle their team mate in order to prevent him from running outside the safety of their makeshift bunker. The woman who had first spoken to the X-Men now stared at them with teary, pleading eyes. Colossus balled his fists and looked back and forth from the woman to the speeding train. Finally, with a look of resignation, Colossus turned and thundered off towards the train tracks.

"It's your show from here, Ruskie. You can do it." Wolverine called after him as he and the Resistance fighters watched his retreating form.

"Just what does he think he's doing?" one of the men asked Wolverine.

"Well," the mutant began, "fast as Pete is, he won't make it to your body 'fore that train flattens'em, so he'll just have to keep the train from gettin' that far. No big deal, really."

"You've gotta be kidding me!" the man shrieked indignantly, "He'll splattered all over the front of that thing!"

Wolverine ignored the man and looked on, not a hint of worry on his chiseled face. His eyes followed Colossus as he finally reached the track that the train was moving along. The rails began to jump and tremble as the locomotive drew nearer, and Colossus turned to face his opponent.

The mutant dug his heels into the ground on either side of the tracks and held his arms straight out in front of him with his palms turned outward, a grimace creeping across his face. The train blared its

horn, warning him to either move or be annihilated. The train sped closer and closer while Colossus remained motionless, his posture sign of defiance to the impending threat. The ground rumbled and the whistle grew in pitch as the train rocketed towards Colossus from less than fifty feet away. The spectators, all except Wolverine, held their breath and stared wide-eyed and unblinking at the scene taking place before them.

In mere seconds the train reached Colossus, firing its horn more frantically than ever just before impact. The nose of the train met Colossus's waiting hands with tremendous force and the sound of an exploding bomb. The metal of the engine car crumpled like tinfoil, and Colossus's arms buckled slightly at the elbows. The mutant's body was knocked back several yards, but he resisted the force, digging his heels in deep and leaving a great trench on either side of the tracks. The sudden, powerful resistance caused the wheels of the train to screech loudly and spit sparks along the tracks. The engine came to a complete halt several yards after impact, but the momentum of the subsequent cars caused them to jackknife and snap their connectors like matchsticks. The cargo cars were flung sideways off of the track on either side, smashing into the ground and continuing to roll forward, scattering supplies and chunks of metal from the ruined locomotive. Finally all came to a rest again, the track smoldering from the intense and very sudden friction, and the remaining cars on the track compacted together like an accordion. Colossus exhaled loudly and dropped his hands from the deep indentations they made at the nose of the engine car.

The civilians sat in stunned silence, staring down the tracks at the wreckage. Colossus lumbered back to the squad of combatants, then stopped as he raised his head to look at each one in turn, a confused expression on his face.

"Where is Logan?" He asked impatiently, but the humans were still mesmerized by Colossus's feat of incredible strength. Finally, one of the men snapped back into reality and shrugged his shoulders, saying distractedly, "I don't knowâ€| I never saw him leave. How did you do that -"

"Logan! Where are you?" Colossus cut the man's question short as he attempted to locate Wolverine. "Logan? Logan!"

Logan was too far away to answer, however, as he had slipped by when the action started, completely unnoticed by the civilians, as well as the sniper. He quickly yet silently made his way to the opposite end of the canal, past the unconscious Kevin (whose legs were pinned under a giant block of concrete), and up a slight embankment that rose on either side of the tunnel. Wolverine stopped in the shadows and sniffed the air. He could smell the odor of someone nearby, so the sniper had to be close. He continued darting between cover, moving as silently as a cat. He climbed uphill a few feet and finally spotted the barrel of a rifle, sticking out ever so slightly from the brim of the tunnel. The barrel was pointed at the pile of rubble that the civilians were hiding behind, and Wolverine could see Colossus's metal body glinting in the distance.

Slowly and carefully Wolverine made his way up on to the brim of the tunnel, being careful to stay outside the sniper's peripheral vision. When he reached the top, he was finally able to make out the sniper's form in the darkness. Lying on his stomach and cradling a very large

rifle, the sniper was still aiming at the civilians several hundred yards away. Wolverine closed in on the sniper, slowly sliding his claws out from between his knuckles. The mutant was nearly ten feet away when a clump of earth cracked under his foot, echoing in the tiny space. The alerted sniper dropped his rifle and drew his sidearm as he rolled around to face his assassin. Wolverine froze and cursed under his breath as the soldier took aim and shot him in the forehead.

The bullet split the skin on Wolverine's forehead, spattering blood on the ceiling and all over the mutant's face. The force of the shot knocked Wolverine backwards and landed him flat on his back. Thanks to his adamantium skull, however, the bullet was deflected as soon as it passed through the skin, ricocheting into the dirt walls. The blood still saturated Wolverine's face as he lay there motionless, so the sniper rose to his feet and walked over to investigate what he thought was a dead body.

Wolverine continued to play possum — he loved this maneuver, especially since it worked so well with opponents who were unfamiliar with his mutant powers. Take a shot to the head, play dead, and then pounce when they get too comfortable. Works like a charm, Wolverine thought.

The X-Man could feel the soldier's footsteps through the ground as he circled around his prostrated body, his breathing quick and short, indicating that he wasn't expecting an attack. The soldier placed a booted foot on the ground, right next to Wolverine's face, while he raised the other to kick the mutant in the side. Just as the sniper's foot was about to connect, however, Wolverine lifted his hand and plunged his middle claw into the center of his enemy's foot, nearly splitting it in half.

The sniper screamed in pain and drew a large combat knife from his ankle sheath as Wolverine sprung to his feet and threw a right hook at his face. By pure luck, the blade intercepted Wolverine's blow before it hit its target, sliding between the two bones in Wolverine's forearm, impaling his limb on the knife. Wolverine growled and yanked his arm away, the knife still sticking through it. This bought the sniper enough time to retrieve his pistol from the ground, but just as he raised the weapon to fire, Wolverine lashed out with his uninjured hand, cutting the pistol and half of the soldier's hand into several pieces.

The Combine soldier hobbled backwards a few steps, looking around for another weapon, while Wolverine wrenched the knife out of his arm and threw it off the edge of the tunnel, out of either's reach. The mutant expected it to be an easy kill now, but just as the thought crossed his mind, the sniper leapt desperately for his rifle a few feet away. Wolverine sprung after him, leaping over the soldier with his claws drawn just as the narrow gap between the outside of the tunnel and the surrounding earth was filled with the sound of a discharging rifle. The bullet hit Wolverine in the lower left abdomen, passing through his body and embedding itself in the earth behind him. The mutant let out a loud grunt and hit the floor with a thud, inches from his prey. He could hear the sniper fumbling for another round.

Despite his agony, Wolverine managed to drag himself closer to the sniper, and before the Combine could load his weapon and take aim he

threw himself at the soldier, jamming both sets of claws into his enemy's ribcage. The sniper's body went limp instantly. Wolverine rolled off of the sniper and lay there on the ground, waiting for his wounds to heal. After a while he could hear the faint sounds of his comrade calling out for him.

"Logan! Logan! Where are you?" Colossus called. Wolverine heard his voice growing louder, and so he stuck his bloody arm over the edge of the tunnel and let out a weakened moan.

"Ah, there you are!" Wolverine could hear his friend hurrying up the slope toward him. The big mutant could barely squeeze into the confined space, only to grab Wolverine by the ankle and drag him out.

"God, Logan. You look horrible." Colossus said, "Those gunshots we heard must have hit their target."

Wolverine smiled as he lay on the ground with his eyes shut. "Yeah, he got in a couple lucky shots. I got in some of my own, too."

"Da. Apparently you had the last word there. Good thing, too" the humans needn't worry about the sniper anymore." Colossus said as he lifted his wounded friend onto his shoulders.

Colossus carried Wolverine back down the slope and over to the group of civilians, who were tending to their friend Kevin. Colossus was able to remove the rubble from the young man just before he found Wolverine, but Kevin's legs had been crushed from the fallen debris. All looked up as the two mutants approached.

"Our friend Logan has taken care of the sniper problem," Colossus beamed, "so there is no long any need to fear death from afar. Logan has many injuries, but he should be completely recovered in only a few minutesâ€| tops."

"Glad to hear it," one of the men said, although without much sincerity, "but just how exactly is that possible? You see, we're just a little bit confused right now, if you couldn't tell. You stopped a speeding train dead in its tracks using only your bare hands, and your friend takes several gunshots that would normally kill a man, and neither of you carry any weapons or equipment like the Resistance or even the Combine. I think now's the time to answer our questions. First among them: who are you guys?"

The two mutants quickly explained to the humans about the X-Men, Xavier's school, mutants in general, and finally the teleportation catastrophe and their quest that brought them to the present.

"Logan's ability is that he heals almost instantly after being wounded, although some more serious wounds such as these might take a few minutes to hours to fully heal," Colossus explained, "also, my friend has a skeleton encased in an unbreakable metal, as well as a set of claws on each hand of like material, capable of cleaving most anything their edges are set against."

"I see," the first woman had said after digesting that a while, "and youâ€| what is it that you areâ€| capable of?"

"Pete here's our brick house," Wolverine answered. He was fully recovered from his battle wounds and slowly rose to his feet, aware of the humans' growing admiration for their new allies. "Five-hundred pounds of indestructible organic steel comes in handy, especially when it's capable of lifting over a hundred tons as easily as you take out your garbage. Just ask Pete if you ever need a pickle jar opened."

Some of the humans grinned with excitement, some stood open-mouthed in astonishment, and one — the woman who had first spotted them and was apparently the leader of this particular squad — appeared suspicious, yet clearly amazed. With their incredible abilities, these strangers seemed as though they were a two-man army. They had battled through the East Side Depot, through the Combine-infested streets of City 17, and now they had cleared the canal of all opposition, a task which twenty of the Resistance's finest troops would have had trouble accomplishing. If the Resistance gained their allegiance in battle they would be unstoppable, but if they turned out to be hostile — they had to know for sure if the mutants were trustworthy.

"We could use your help," the woman spoke up suddenly, "If you're willing, that is. There's a district in the city that we've been trying to take for strategical purposes, but so far all attempts have failed, resulting in many Resistance casualties. Apparently, the Combine are guarding the entire sixteen-block radius with striders. Our scouts have spotted over a dozen in the area, which is quite a bit more firepower than the nearby squads can handle."

"Striders?" Wolverine asked, raising his eyebrows, "Haven't heard of a strider yet. I take it they're pretty tough, eh?"

"Pretty tough?" One of the men rasped incredulously, "they're the most terrifying things I've ever seen in my life: A four-story-tall biomechanical war machine that eats Resistance armies for breakfast. They have three long, spiked legs, an automatic pulse cannon, and some kind of pulse blast that obliterates anything it hits. They're walking nightmares."

"Sounds like walking tin cans, waiting to be opened," Wolverine smirked as he showed off a fistful of claws, "point us in the right direction. I could use a good scrap."

End
file.